

dificultad mostraban divergencias en lo referente a los intereses con el mundo financiero al mismo tiempo que prevenía sobre la necesidad de ser crítico.<sup>15</sup>

No podemos olvidar que —aunque parezca chocante— cuando todo vale, cuando no importa lo que se piense o lo que se haga porque todo es engullido por el mercado y por el consumo, la mayoría de las cosas no suelen valer nada. Desde este punto de vista, la blandura conceptual no parece en absoluto una metodología de futuro, sino una reacción frente al pasado.

Como dice de forma acertada Baudrillard, «el momento crucial se da en la transición desde unos signos que disimulan algo a unos signos que disimulan que no hay nada».<sup>16</sup>

Y cuando detrás de los signos y de los objetos no hay nada, el recurso a la trivialidad deviene patético y el afuncionalismo llega a lo absurdo si, además, se utilizan los medios de producción y de reproducción y de reproducción multiplicándose sus efectos.

Por todo lo anterior, pensamos que la reflexión y el espíritu crítico han de ser en estos momentos los protagonistas de la escena si no queremos convertir todo en una mascarada objetual o en un carnaval del «*dis-seny*»,\* es decir, del diseño sin *seny* y sin razón. Habrá que ver, en definitiva, cómo evoluciona todo.

## Objects midway between art and design

One of the phenomena which have become apparent in the world of art during the decade of the 80's is a certain recovery of the object as theme, motive, and means of expression. This recovery has often even become fashionable.

The approach to the object world is no novelty in the history of 20th century art, but lately many young—or not so young—artists have begun their activity or have inclined it in a very specific way towards the achievement of objects or towards the object environment. Sometimes this approach is from a more sculptural point of view; at others it parts from the contributions and the esthetic of Dadaism, Surrealism, Conceptual Art, or Minimalism; at others, through a 11 kinds of Assemblies and Installations; and at yet others, from perhaps even more perverse or merely superficial positions—the majority—as a consequence of the backlash from what has been called postmodernism.

Nevertheless, the complex relations established between the «objet d'art» and the ideology dominant in current society—massive consumerism, materialism, assembly-line production, market research, standardization, etc.—are specially tense and contradictory.

However, in the area of design—and more concretely of furniture and everyday object design—a phenomenon has appeared which could be considered inverse. We refer to the designing (?) of objects which lack, or at least have a very reduced, functionality. Objects which in some cases have an exaggerated esthetic or decorative plus, or which, in other cases, are only the product of a speculative and/or experimental action or thought, much closer to a free artistic activity than to one of projectual and methodologic design.

These two inversely proportional phenomena have led to an undefined territory with vague limits that place many objects in an indefinite, unstable, and contradictory position between the world of art and that of design. A terrain where that which Baudrillard called «the culture of Image» plays the lead part.

15. Daniel Capella, «Entrevista con Alessandro Mendini», *ARDI*, n. 20, Barcelona, marzo-abril, 1991.

16. Jean Baudrillard, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

\* Diseño en catalán: *dis-seny*. Y además: combinación del prefijo de negación *dis*, y la voz catalana *seny* equivalente a 'juicio, ponderación, cordura'. (*N. del T.*)

## The culture of image

The culture of image has brought, consequently and inevitably, other images, other symbols, and therefore other objects. Images, symbols, and objects that respond to a demand and a need of the powers that be—economic, politic, and social—to try to objectualize and visualize rather intangible aspects of social relations.

The truth is, as Baudrillard states, that

suddenly, another power figure has appeared on the scene, that of collective demand for power symbols.

This demand for power symbols on many occasions has become evident in symbolic images and strongly convincing objects with a great visual impact. In these cases

it is no longer a question of imitation or of reiteration, nor even of parody, but rather of an impersonation of the real by the symbols of reality, that is to say, of a disuasive operation of all real processes by their operative doubles.

In our country, it is interesting to observe that some of the largest consumers of «design» have been public institutions, political powers, leisure premises, and great monopolies. As if these institutions most needed the culture of image and at the same time were the most conscious of this need.

We must take into account, therefore, that this is the stratum where many of the objects midway between art and design appear.

## The object in contemporary art

The history of objects in contemporary art has a long tradition. If we except sculpture—to be understood as the product of the act of carrying out, modelling, or constructing three-dimensional works—the appearance of several «objects», fragments, bibelots, or machines which become works of art—rather by the fact of using artistic channels or means than by their own characteristics—is recognized at least since the beginning of our century.

From Duchamp's *ready-made* or the esthetic of the Soviet Constructivists—who wished to take in the

plastic arts as well as design in general—to Donald Judd's *specific objects* or Jean Tinguely's absurd machines, there have been many artists who have used objects, who have manipulated them, or who have wished to redefine them.

Lately this has been exaggeratedly stressed. This has forced art criticism to look for new definitions and concepts which intend an adjustment to new activities and new behaviour.

The use of objects as an excuse is the consequence of the avalanche of all kinds of sculpture which we have experienced during the last few years. An avalanche which implies an enormous plurality and a great quantity of diverse and at times innovating manifestations, which have led to the use of the term «new sculptural performance».

These new performances refer to matters which till now had been excluded from traditional sculptural practice which has failed

in its intents to attribute to itself the exclusivity of the *sculptural* in detriment of all other options: objects, furniture, *ensembles*, machinery, residual, spatial and accumulative, which the European and US scenes have offered us with so much passion and dedication for the last few years.

The truth is that more and more often, the number of artistic experiences linked to tridimensionality and space, and centering their attention on the environment surrounding the object, becomes greater.

## Objects decontextualized and defunctionalized

The decontextualization of objects has been—at least since Duchamp's *ready-made*—one of the characteristic forms of the art of our century and one of the methods used by artists.

Marcel Duchamp's *Roue de bicyclette* (1913), *Porte-bouteilles* (1914), *In advance of the broken arm* (1915), or *Fontaine* (1917) are objects which have undergone neither transformation nor manipulation. Only their placement in space and their presentation in an unusual and different context has laden them with new meanings made artistic by the will of the artist.

Some present-day artists base their personal language precisely on this decontextualization and de-

functionalization of objects which have often undergone some manipulation.

Jean Pierre Raynaud's *Carrelage + siège roulant* (1990), for example, is a piece in which we can see a hospital wheelchair, folded up, painted red, and mounted in a wooden moulding covered with white tile. In this work, the utilitarian object has been deprived of its function and «framed» in the manner of a work of art. That leads us to believe —and proves once more— that any object can be made art if we remove its functional aspect.

There are many contemporary artists who work with objects, either as their starting points, or from objects, decontextualizing them; many of their works could serve as examples. Just to cite a few, we can mention Arman, John Armleder, Richard Artschwager, Ashley Bickerton, Robert Grover, Mike Kelley, Bertrand Lavier, Allan McCollum, Cady Noland, Claes Oldenburg, Daniel Spoerri, Haim Steinbach, Krzysztof Wodiczko, etc. Further on we will refer to some of their works.

Where designers have traditionally taken function into account as one of the principal characteristics of the design project and therefore of the object, artists have converted the object into a work of art by extracting its functionality.

As Ann Hindrytot says —referring to artists— in this case, «the central creative act is the appropriation of the “exterior” object. This appropriation and the consequent displacement» are what give a new meaning to the work. Decontextualization therefore holds implicit the change of meaning and of content.

Decontextualizations even come to take in the field of poetry which was traditionally thought to be linked to the literary world. This would be the case, for example, of the Catalan poet Joan Brossa. His activity has gradually veered to the use of all kinds of everyday objects which he combines to give them poetic meaning. Joan Brossa's object-poems are based mainly on decontextualization, as well as on juxtaposition and confrontation of objects and images.

To cite only a few examples, *Plat de plat* (*Plateful of plate*, 1986), is, as its title implies, a plateful of pieces of another plate; *Música* (*Music*, 1986), is no more than a set of earphones with earrings; *Sense paisatge* (*No view*, 1986), a wooden door which hides a camera behind it; *Blanc* (*Blank*, 1986), is only a gun which goes through a bullseye.

## Objects and industrial design

One of the main historic objectives of industrial design was the elaboration of products to satisfy consumer needs. The idea was therefore to project objects which were distinctive, not only for their esthetic quality but also for their functionality.

It is a known fact that in the context of human social conduct, there are two different kinds of human relations. One is developed through conduct (word, gesture, etc.); the other, through objects. The latter can be considered an indirect relationship. Therefore, objects of industrial design, from the traditional point of view, were already a part of indirect personal relations.

But nowadays, in post-industrial society —where it exists— functional values have given way to symbolic values and decorativism, and functional objects have been substituted by their symbols. These have consequently become symbols of indirect interpersonal relations. Altogether, an example of the sophisticated schizophrenia of post-industrial societies.

## The failure of industrial design

One of the phenomena which have also contributed to this situation is that which we could call the failure of industrial design. A failure which the more critical observers had already denounced and explained more than two decades ago.

Today, a radical criticism is necessary: the project of industrial design has failed, mainly because its program was never explicitly political and anti-capitalist, but also because artists were the first to sabotage it, not being disposed to become projectual technicians, resigning from inspiration and substituting method, resigning from the schools and substituting the market.

For Giulio Carlo Argan, one of the main reasons for the situation we live in is the subjection to the laws of the market and of mass consumption. This massified consumption has brought about certain negative phenomena which have become the stars of the show.

The negative phenomena of *styling* and *kitsch* are by no means rarities or deviations, but rather occupy the whole of the phenomenologic camp of industrial design.

All this because

psychological needs which correspond to symbolic products have been created, the logic of production has been dispensed with, in order to exploit the irrationality of the market.

Besides all this, design is every day more of a show and a news spot, something useful to entertain the public and to fill the pages of numerous magazines that give more space to advertisements, publicity, and promotion than to commentary, information, or criticism (*what is that?*) of design.

For this reason it is logic to think that

if at the end of its evolution, industrial design is no more than news, the problem no longer belongs to object projection, but rather to the mass information circuits.

### Experimental design and the annihilation of borders

To this situation we must add another phenomenon which has most contributed to the blurring of borders and to objectual interbreeding. We mean so-called «postmodernism» and also so-called «experimental design», «radical design», etc.

Evidently, in the culture of contemporary art and design, the limits are in a critical state, and the borders between disciplines have become hazy.

The experimental design of the eighties has opted for a position which we could describe as border-line from a geographical standpoint. On the border, diversity is acceptable as the basis of any eclecticism, but it can also mean a considerable hodge-podge and jumble.

The border situation has allowed contemporary design to escape from the restrictive limitations of crude functionalism, but it has also led to a confused, ephemeral, banal, and heterogeneous situation, in which fashion has become an omnipresent concept and a paradoxically uniforming quasi-dictatorship.

«Design» bars, boutiques and premises, magazines, and diverse «scenes» have circulated in the design world of our country some of the basic postulates of postmodernism: de-ideologization, singularity, fragmentation, image, appearance, play for play's sake, a-

historicism, trans-avantgardism, copy, eclecticism, decorativism, interdisciplinarity, acriticism, etc.

Designers have become artists and have allowed themselves to be led by the fever of capricious originality and puerile wit.

### Some symptomatic examples

We will now try to present some concrete cases of artistic activities which incide, one way or another, on aspects related to the problems and phenomena which surround work with and from objects.

We choose examples with preference from the art world because they allow us a vision, peripheric to design itself, and we can thus begin to limit and to bind from the outside the complexity of the theory and practice of modern design.

On the other hand, we must consider that many designers wish to be, and are, artists, and that many objects of design have become artistic. But that would lead us to reflections and commentaries which we will leave for another occasion.

#### «Furniture» by Artschwager

The simulation of noble materials by means of artificial materials, and disfunctionality —the taking as a referent the formal aspect of functional and utilitarian objects but removing their functionality— are some of the principal characteristics of Richard Artschwager's work.

Sculptures (?) by Artschwager (Washington, D.C., 1923) remind us of tables, drawers, windows, chairs, chests of drawers, mirrors, pulpits, etc., but do not allow us to use them as we could do with the objects to which they refer.

Artschwager's work has a direct relation to the theme we are studying, as has the evident use of simulation as a basic conceptual premise of his work. Artschwager has been creating works which greatly resemble disfunctional objects. His art —as Dan Cameron says— «is notable for the ironic use which he makes of synthetic materials to imitate "noble" substances».

It is curious that Artschwager, before being recognized as a plastic artist, made commercial furniture for a living. During the fifties he designed a great deal of

furniture simple, modern, and well finished. Three wood pieces designed by him —an office table, a revolving chair, and shelves— were included in the exposition «Furniture by Craftsmen» organized by the New York Museum of Contemporary Crafts at the beginning of 1957.

In 1958 his furniture workshop was completely destroyed by a huge fire. And it is from this unfortunate accident that the author became intensely dedicated to art.

His experience as a furniture designer was very useful to him to define his personal plastic language, an intelligent and original language based on the linguistic and communicative capacities of objects and furniture dispossessed of their utilitarian functions.

The most apparently anti-artistic materials —like formica— were the ones that catapulted him in his artistic tasks.

It was *formica* that made it all explode. Formica, that great horror of our time, which I suddenly began to like because I was sick and tired of looking at all that lovely wood... It had absolutely no colour and it was very hard and shiny, so that it was a panel that represented a piece of wood. If you take that and make something of it, then you have an object and a picture of something at the same time.

Artschwager's works remind us of traditional furniture, but they are only an image of it, a symbol. The symbol of an object that does not have the function that its visual aspect seems to announce.

Artschwager's tables and chairs are not exactly like any table or chair in the real world, even though their aspect makes us deduce that they are tables or chairs. On the one hand, they invite you to use them, while on the other, they reject this use. If we take good notice, we observe that they are slightly too high or too low, that they are too compact and shiny, that they leave no room for your legs, etc. Then we realize that they are sham tables or chairs and that they are, rather, their symbols, even though they are three-dimensional.

### Wodiczko: utopic design?

Krzysztof Wodiczko (Warsaw, 1943) is internationally known, mostly in the art world, for the numerous projections of gigantic images onto buildings and repre-

sentative public spots and monuments all over the world. This is the activity which has given him the most popular effect.

Among these projections we can cite, for example, the one onto Nelson's Column, in Trafalgar Square, London, which transformed it into a cruise missile wrapped in barbed wire. Also in London, he projected a swastika onto the South African Embassy building. Onto the front of the Swiss Parliament in Berna he projected a gigantic eye which looked askance at the bank buildings on either side. Onto the façade of the New York Whitney Museum, a pair of open hands with the inscription «Glasnost in Usa». In 1990, in what was then East Berlin, by means of a slide he transformed the statue of Lenin into a beggar dragging along his belongings. In Madrid, in January 1991, he projected onto the Francoist Arco de Triunfo messages alluding to the Gulf War.

But what we are interested in are the other activities which Wodiczko also carries out. His formation as an industrial designer (he graduated from the *Akademie Sztuk Pięknych* of Warsaw in 1968) has allowed him to conceive and create objects, instruments, and vehicles — more or less utopic — which share with the projections a vocation towards a type of public art with an evidently provocative conceptual charge and social criticism.

The *Podium vehicle*, the *Homeless vehicle*, or the *Poliscar* are some of the «designs» which Wodiczko has thought out precisely for those who cannot make professional commissions because they lack economic means, although they have a very obvious and vital need of a certain type of object.

The *Podium vehicle* (1977-79) is a kind of pulpit on wheels driven by an electric motor which moves only in one direction. It is intended to facilitate the work of spontaneous orators who wish to speak in public and who must go in search of their listeners. The intensity of the speaker's voice controls the speed of the vehicle.

The *Homeless vehicle* (1988-89) is designed to provide for the need for shelter of the homeless. As the artist himself states, «it is intended to be useful to the significant number of individuals who, according to all forecasts for the future, will continue to be pushed into leading a nomad life within urban environs».

There were four variations made of this vehicle which differed in construction materials, some characteristics, and technical improvements. They were test-

ed, used, and publicly presented in several streets, parks, and plazas in New York (Manhattan, Brooklyn, etc.) and in Philadelphia.

The *Poliscar*, another proposition for the homeless, can be used either as a habitat, sentry box, or means of transport and communication. Its chassis allows for a transformation of the vehicle to three positions: vertical, for moving through the city, and two horizontal positions, one for driving and another for rest or sleep.

The *Poliscar* has also been thought out so that the homeless can learn and develop strategies and new techniques of communication, some of which have already been used by *squatters* to protect themselves against, among other things, the New York Police eviction actions. They are therefore equipped with short-wave transmitters and video connections.

At the exhibition the Polish artist held at the Antoni Tàpies Foundation, Barcelona, in the summer of 1992, he presented for the first time a new «design»: the *Alien staff*.

The *Alien staff* is an object which

resembles the staff of the Biblical shepherd and the bourgeois cane of the 18th century. It is equipped with a small high-tech monitor and a minute speaker. It is also equipped with a video, batteries, and a walkie-talkie or a short-wave transmitter which the user carries in a special back-pack. The tiny size of the monitor, the fact that it is at eye level, and the nearness to the user's face are significant aspects of the design. The tiny image on the screen attracts people's attention and makes them draw near to the monitor—and therefore to the user's face—and thus diminishes the usual distance toward the immigrant, the intruder.

Because of all we have stated so far, we agree with Yves Michaud when he asserts that

it is impossible to say what activity Krzysztof Wodiczko carries out: is he a designer of utopic objects? an inventor of products of futurist consumption? political activist? subversive philosopher?

And we share his deduction when he concludes

only the art world could welcome this displaced person within its borders.

Wodiczko's instruments and vehicles are to be found within the imprecise borders of art and design

and are characterized by their strong charge of social and political commitment.

They directly affect one of the deep wounds and deficiencies of commercialized design: the dependence—by means of commissions and orders—on client and market interests, by which, in most cases, the designed product becomes a symbol of ostentation, a distinctive of social class, and/or a power symbol.

### «Furniture»: Alessandro Mendini's ideas and objects

The works, concepts, and proposals of Italian designers such as Alessandro Mendini or Ettore Sottsass have been of prime importance for the history of design in the last decades and have meant a shock and a provocation.

Alessandro Mendini (Milan, 1931) is known as an architect, ideologue and theorist of design, painter, furniture, object, and interior designer, editor of publications such as *Casabella*, *Modo*, *Domus*, *Olo*, etc. His designs are part of the permanent collection of the New York Museum of Modern Art and of the George Pompidou Centre, in Paris. During his career he has promoted and been part of collectives such as Global Tools, Memphis, Alchimia, Nuova Alchimia, etc.

His ideas and esthetic positions have become manifestos as is the case of *The manifesto of farewells*.

Mendini is another of these individuals who sail happily and amusingly on the turbulent and confused waters to be found between art and design. He even likes to create a confusion between the two forms of expression, what we might call «art-design» or «design-art».

For Mendini, decorativity is essential and exciting. Perhaps that is why he believes that one of the best means of communicating his concept of life is furniture design. Mendini's furniture and objects are ironic, fun, sensual, contradictory, speculative, iconoclastic, and, in many senses, artistic.

But to speak of Mendini would bring us to a reference to creators who are generally still considered to be in the orbit of design, and that would oblige us to enter fully into the world of «designers», which, as we said before, we would try to avoid. On some other occasion we will enlarge on this more willingly. We cannot avoid, however, a passing reference.

## Serial works versus unique works. The case of Allan McCollum

The American artist Allan McCollum (Los Angeles, 1944) has devoted himself since 1977 to the investigation of the work of art inasmuch as it attains a function in the conduct of the social system, by reflecting on the status of the artistic object and on art in contemporary culture.

McCollum brings up in his work the contradiction and confrontation between serial art and unique art, between mass production and individual enjoyment. His favourite themes are the reflection on the function, the meaning, and the value of art in our society.

The relation between art and craft, industrial and mass production of objects, and the tension produced between culture and mass communication media are also themes derived from the contemplation of his work.

McCollum's art is characterized by a special way of using serialization as a work method. The majority of his serial works and his expositions affect the objectualization of the pieces. This is the case, for example, of *Plaster surrogates*, *Perfect vehicles* or *Individual works*.

*Plaster surrogates* act as objectual symbols of a universal picture. Formally, they are small framed squares which have a black pictorial surface, that is, a non-image, a characteristic that accentuates its objectuality.

The *Surrogates* can be hung individually or collectively, in small groups or occupying massively all the walls of the room where they are shown. No two pieces are the same, and each has been hand-made craftly—by a team of assistants—, though at first sight they appear to have been machine made.

The contemplation of them makes us think of the diverse social uses that pictorial work can have; whether used as decorative elements, objects of exchange, prestige symbols, or objects to which a personal meaning is given.

*Plaster vehicles* are plaster pieces which differ only in colour and scale. Their model is the typical Chinese vase and they are presented in groups on pedestals or else on human scale, dominating space in the same way as a statue or a sculpture.

These perfect vehicles refer mainly to the concept of the transcendent art work, as the function of the object has been destroyed.

*Individual works* refers more directly to mass pro-

duction although they have not been made by automated means of production.

They are small objects—between five and eight centimetres—that can be handled, which make no reference to any function. Each has been produced by a random combination of 150 moulds whose forms have been taken from everyday objects or fragments of objects. There are no two alike, even though their multiplicity and apparent sameness give the impression of their having been mass-produced.

When they are shown, they are presented in quantities of approximately 10,000 pieces, spread over counters of some fifty sq. metres. This allows us to view them individually, contrary to what happens with supermarket products, where objects tend to lose their individual character.

McCollum's work has the virtue of not avoiding the problems characteristic to the functioning of modern society. Originality, uniqueness, mass production, commerce, exchange, symbolic value, social value, etc., are concepts which are the bases of our culture. To ignore them almost always means to become an alienated victim of them.

Most definitely, McCollum's work is fully inserted in the problem that Baudrillard cited when he said that

everywhere in the «civilized» world, the building up of «stocks» of objects has brought with it the complementary process of «stocks» of humans, things, long waits, traffic jams, concentrations, campings; «mass production» is this, not in the sense of a massive production or of a use by the masses, but rather in the sense of a production of *mass*.

## (In)conclusion (some inconclusive conclusions)

There is nothing further from the author's intention—because it is impossible—than to claim to draw conclusions from a slippery, heterogeneous, complex, open, and confused situation such as this. Any conclusion which could be intended at this moment would be inconclusive because we are immersed (and submerged) in this problem.

Only as a kind of (in)conclusion or inconclusive conclusion, I would like to mention some aspects or dialectic concepts to be found at the eye of the objectual hurricane. We refer to acriticism opposed to the crit-

ical spirit, isolated theory or practice as opposed to praxis, market dependency *versus* market independence, massification confronted by individuality, afunctionalism *versus* functionality, industrial or post-industrial design face to face with ecologic design, etc.

Probably, however, at the base of all this problem is to be found the lack of criticism about the situation which surrounds us.

Acriticism is one of the reigning characteristics of the moment, as much in the field of arts as in that of design in general. Clearly, thus, we need to reflect on the ideas and the objects which post-modernity in general has left us, on the cult of banality and decorativism, on cynicism, on all the trans, neo, and post, if we do not wish to fall into the trap of fostering an academy of post-modernity and banality.

Alessandro Mendini himself recently criticized the fact that many young designers barely diverged from the interests of the financial world, at the same time as he warned of the need for being critical.

We cannot forget that—even if it seems shocking—when anything goes, when it does not matter what you think or what you do, because everything is swallowed up by the market and by consumerism, the majority of things usually have no value. From this point of view, conceptual softness does not seem to be a methodology for the future, but rather a reaction against the past.

As Baudrillard correctly says, «the crucial moment arrives at the transition from symbols that conceal something to symbols that conceal that there is nothing».

And when behind the symbols and the objects there is nothing, the recourse to banality becomes pathetic, and afunctionalism becomes absurd if, on top of this, we use the means of production and reproduction to multiply its effects.

Because of all this, we believe that a reflective and critical spirit must be the protagonist at this moment if we do not wish all this to become an objectual masquerade or a carnival of «dis-sign», that is, of design without sense or reason. It will be worth watching how it all evolves.